

What About Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas? #4

1 Corinthians 8:10; 2 Kings 18:3-6

August 16, 2015

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The primary biblical reason cited by fellow brethren for celebrating a ‘secular’ Christmas is that Paul (in 1 Corinthians 8-10) declared that meat offered to idols was not sinful in itself to eat to the glory of God. In other words, since the pagan origin of meat offered to idols did not pollute the meat, neither does the pagan origin of Yule celebration or the Roman Catholic origin of Christmas pollute the secular celebration of Christmas. Though I love and appreciate my fellow brethren who stand firmly in upholding the Regulative Principle of Worship (which teaches that only that worship which is authorized by God in Scripture is acceptable worship to offer God), nevertheless, I must take exception to their interpretation and application of 1 Corinthians 8-10; for a significant qualification made by Paul himself is overlooked in regard to meat that was offered to idols.

Thus, let us continue to answer the following question: Should we celebrate a ‘secular’ Christmas? The main points for the sermon this Lord’s Day are the following: (1) Clarifications from Past Sermons on Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas; (2) Meat Offered to Idols Is Forbidden When It Becomes a Stumbling Block to Others (1 Corinthians 8:10).

I. Clarifications from Past Sermons on Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas.

A. It is necessary that as a topic of this nature is being addressed that clarifications will need to be made as this discussion advances. Therefore, here are a couple needed clarifications.

1. Because I have cited various sources that associate the evergreen tree, mistletoe, holly, gift-giving, feasting etc. with the pagan and Roman Catholic celebration of Christmas, it is important that I make clear that the *intrinsic* act (for example) of gift-giving on December 25th is not sinful in itself. One may give a wedding gift, a house-warming gift, an anniversary gift, or a diaconal gift to someone in urgent need on December 25th without sin. Neither a gift in itself nor even December 25th in itself (as a day in the calendar year) is *intrinsically* superstitious or *intrinsically* idolatrous. It is not *intrinsically* the day or *intrinsically* the gift-giving that is wrong, it is rather the association that day and its celebration (historically and presently) have with the superstition found in pagan and Roman Catholic idolatry that lead me to the conclusion that the celebration of a ‘secular’ Christmas is unbiblical.

a. **Illustration.** Even when the brazen serpent that was appointed by the Lord at the time of Moses became a superstitious image to God’s people in their subsequent history, it was destroyed (2 Kings 18:3-6). Now the brazen serpent was not *intrinsically* superstitious or *intrinsically* idolatrous (as to the materials used or as to the form in which the image was made). However, because many in Israel did treat it superstitiously (offering incense to it), King Hezekiah utterly destroyed it (along with the high places, images, and groves), so that even those who did not treat it superstitiously were no longer able to look upon it, admire its craftsmanship, or even have a ‘secular’ family celebration near it in a non-superstitious way (if they chose to do so).

b. **Application.** Though the day, December 25th (in itself), is not *intrinsically* superstitious (just as no day in itself is *intrinsically* superstitious), yet Christmas (which never had the approbation of the Lord as did the brazen serpent when it was originally made) was and is a day of superstitious celebration of man’s appointment among pagans, non-Christians, and Christians. Dear ones, just as the brazen serpent was utterly destroyed so that none could any longer look upon it, admire its craftsmanship, or celebrate it (whether religiously or secularly), so likewise by application, Christmas ought to

be utterly destroyed (in our hearts, families, churches, and countries) so that none can look upon it or have a family celebration on that day (whether religiously or secularly).

2. One other clarification that I would like to make at this time is that the biblical reason for rejecting a 'secular' Christmas celebration is not because there is a **necessary connection** between (for example) the *intrinsic* act of gift-giving and idolatry on December 25th, so that any and every kind of gift-giving on December 25th **necessarily** and inevitably involves one in idolatry. As already mentioned above, there may be various types of gift-giving on December 25th that are not *intrinsically* sinful, and I would add do not **necessarily** involve one in idolatry (a wedding gift, a housewarming gift, an anniversary gift, a diaconal gift to someone in need). However, I submit that gift-giving with a view to celebrating Christmas on December 25th does have an **associating connection** or a **symbolizing connection** with a superstitious day and its celebration, and that is the biblical reason for rejecting the celebration of a religious or a 'secular' Christmas.

a. **Illustration.** There was no **necessary connection** that involved a Corinthian Christian in idolatry simply because he ate meat that had been offered to idols (as we shall soon see) any more than a Christian eating food marked "kosher" **necessarily** involves him in a Christless Judaism (in following the dietary law). For you see, it was not merely eating meat that was offered to idols (in itself) that brought Paul's warning of idolatry to certain Corinthian Christians, but rather eating meat offered to idols **in the context of celebrating with it at the pagan temple** (1 Corinthians 8:10; 1 Corinthians 10:20). In other words, the sin of the Corinthians was in eating meat offered to idols in such a way as to *associate with* and *symbolize with* idolatry in wedding celebrations and in anniversary celebrations at the temple restaurant. The meat itself was still *intrinsically* indifferent (and not *intrinsically* idolatrous) regardless of where they ate it (whether in the temple or at home). What was particularly different was that at the temple they were eating the meat offered to idols as an aspect of celebration with pagans, who did in fact consider the meat offered to idols as consecrated to a god, who did use the meat offered superstitiously. Thus, it was not because there was a **necessary connection** between eating meat offered to idols and sin, but was rather because there was an **associating connection** or a **symbolizing connection** with superstition and idolatry that was sinful (even though it was not such in the mind of the Corinthian Christian who simply viewed the meat offered to idols as being indifferent in itself).

b. **Application.** So likewise, there is not a **necessary connection** between gift-giving (in itself) on Christmas Day and idolatry, but rather the issue is whether there is an **associating connection** or a **symbolizing connection** in joining in a pagan, Roman Catholic Christmas celebration. As already indicated, one may give a gift for various reasons on December 25th that would not be sinful (because there is no **associating connection** or **symbolizing connection** with a Christmas celebration). However, when one does give a gift because it is Christmas, I submit there is an **associating connection** or a **symbolizing connection** with a pagan, Roman Catholic Christmas Day celebration, and that I submit is the problem (whether one claims to celebrate a religious or a 'secular' Christmas).

B. Before looking at our text for this Lord's Day (1 Corinthians 8:10), I would like to leave the following quotes from Protestant forefathers with you that I think show the connection with idolatry when we associate with and symbolize with idolaters.

[W]e cannot conform, communicate, and **symbolize** with the idolatrous Papists, in the use of the same, without making ourselves idolaters **by participation**. Shall the chaste Spouse of Christ take upon her the ornaments of the Whore? (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, p. 181, emphases added).

For albeit the cutting the hair is **a thing indifferent**, yet because the Gentiles used it **superstitiously**, therefore, Calvin says, albeit it was of itself undetermined [i.e. indifferent in

itself—GLP], nevertheless God did not want it to be allowable to His own people . . . but especially they should avoid all rites by which the religion (of those others) would be attested. **So that from this law [“Ye shall not round the corners of your heads” Leviticus 19:27—GLP] it most manifestly appears that we may not be like idolaters, no not in things which are in themselves indifferent, when we know they do use them superstitiously** (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, p.185, emphases added).

And, moreover, find we not in the canons of the ancient councils, that Christians were forbidden to deck their houses with green boughs and bay leaves [obviously indifferent in themselves—GLP], to observe the calends [first day] of January, to keep the first day of every month, etc. [we could add, “to keep Christmas” —GLP], **because the pagans used to do so?** (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, pp. 187,188, emphases added)

How can it be denied, that many corruptions, contrary to the purity and liberty of the Gospel, **were they never so innocent in themselves**, have accompanied these Novations [i.e. innovations—GLP], such as the superstitious observing of Days, feriatio [i.e. celebrating a holiday—GLP] and cessation from work, on those days, Feasting and guising [this was a practice in Scotland and North England in which people would cloth themselves in fancy dress, often with a mask, and visit people's houses on holidays—GLP] (Alexander Henderson [Westminster divine] and David Dickson [Professor of theology, Church of Scotland], *The Answers of Some Brethren of the Ministrie, to the Replies of the Ministers and Professours of Divinitie in Aberdeene: Concerning the Late Covenant*, 1638).

Notice the reason given for not using the same places, days, and objects as the pagans and Roman Catholics did in their holy days—even though these places, days, and objects were indifferent in themselves—because to do so was to associate and symbolize with idolaters in their superstitious celebrations and practices.

II. Meat Offered to Idols Is Forbidden When It Becomes a Stumbling Block to Others (1 Corinthians 8:10).

A. In 1 Corinthians 7-14, the Apostle Paul is answering questions the Corinthians had asked him in a letter they had sent to him. Beginning with 1 Corinthians 7:1 Paul answers questions related to marriage and being single. In Chapters 8 through 10, he answers questions on this subject of meat offered to idols. In Chapter 11, he answers questions related to abuses that were occurring in worship. In Chapters 12 to 14, he answers questions related to spiritual gifts. Let me attempt to outline briefly for you the problem meat offered to idols presented to the Corinthians in their cultural and religious context.

1. Living in a pagan Greek culture and in a city that was known for its idolatry (Corinth), Christians (particularly Gentiles who had been converted out of paganism) were faced with situations that brought them into conflict with fellow Christians over how to react to these situations in a godly way. What about eating meat that had been offered to idols? Was it pleasing to God to eat such meat? Was the meat polluted because it had been offered to an idol? What about those Christians that were invited by pagan family members or friends to a feast at the pagan temple to celebrate an important event or an accomplishment in the life of a family member or friend? These are the questions that lie behind the instruction Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 8-10. And basically two different groups of Christians in the Church found themselves in disagreement with one another over their responses to these questions: (1) The group that knew and was convinced they could eat meat offered to idols (the “knowers”); and (2) The group that did

not have confidence and was not convinced that they could eat meat offered to idols (the “doubters”).

2. How does Paul answer these questions in 1 Corinthians 8? In summary, Paul lays out the following principles.

a. **First, knowledge of the truth is necessary, but applying that knowledge in love to brethren is not only necessary, but the end or goal of knowledge** (1 Corinthians 8:1-3). There is more to being a faithful Christian than simply growing in knowledge, there is the goal and end of that knowledge—love for God and love for others (1 Timothy 1:5; 1 John 4:8). In other words, Paul is addressing the “knowers” and he agrees with them about what they claim to know, but Paul strongly disagrees with them in their lack of love for fellow Christians, who are not yet fully convinced that eating meat offered to idols is not sinful. A similar situation may arise among Christians over the drinking of alcoholic beverages.

b. **Second, an idol is actually nothing in itself (as to its nature) because in reality there is only one true living God eternally existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit** (1 Corinthians 8:4-6). Idols are lying vanities (Jeremiah 10:14-15). In other words, because an idol is nothing in itself, it does not have the power to pollute meat offered to it. Paul also agrees with the “knowers” in this truth as well.

c. **Third, not every Christian has the same degree of knowledge in being convinced that meat offered to idols can be eaten without sin** (1 Corinthians 8:7). Perhaps some Christians may not believe they should eat food labeled “kosher” at the grocery store because it has been set apart by Jewish rabbis as fit to eat in accordance with the dietary laws of the Old Testament (by which we are no longer bound), whereas others of us would have no problem in eating such food.

d. **Fourth, meat sacrificed to idols may be eaten or not eaten** (1 Corinthians 8:8). In other words, the pagan consecration of meat to an idol did not pollute the meat. Therefore, one is not more pleasing to the Lord if he eats or less pleasing to the Lord if he abstains. However, there are a couple important qualifications to this general rule that we will consider—one this week and one next week. The same thing cannot be said with regard to doctrine, worship, and God’s moral commandments. The Lord is pleased with our obedience to His Word and is displeased with our disobedience to His Word.

e. **Fifth, use not your Christian liberty to eat meat sacrificed to idols as an occasion to lead fellow Christians to do the same when they still have doubts that to do so is approved by the Lord** (1 Corinthians 8:9-13). This section is addressed to the “knowers” rather than to the “doubters”. This is the **first qualification** to eating meat offered to idols: Let us never allow what we are at liberty to use for God’s glory become a stumbling block to a fellow Christian in encouraging him or her who is a “doubter” to do what we as a “knower” can do.

(1) In 1 Corinthians 8:10 the specific situation that brought this problem to the forefront is identified. It is not merely eating meat offered to idols in a general sense, but eating meat offered to idols at the temple restaurant. In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul tells the “knowers” they must not eat meat sacrificed to idols at the temple restaurant because it is exalting their liberty over their love for the brethren who are “doubters”. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul tells the “knowers” they must not eat meat sacrificed to idols at the temple restaurant because it is associating with and symbolizing with idolaters even though they were not going in order to bow down to the idols or in order to eat the meat as consecrated to idols—they were simply going in order to have a secular celebration or a family celebration.

(2) What is the harm done if the “knower” is seen eating meat offered to idols in the temple restaurant? It is a sin against a brother/sister for whom Christ died (1 Corinthians 8:11). It is a sin against Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 8:12). Because this leads the “doubter” to do what he believes he does not have the liberty in Christ to do. It is exalting Christian liberty over Christian love and over a willingness to sacrifice ourselves in order to serve others (1 Corinthians 8:13—perhaps there is some hyperbole in this statement, but it shows the extent to which Paul was willing to sacrifice his own Christian liberty in order to love and serve others). Dear ones, is there anything indifferent in itself that you would not be willing to forsake in order to love and serve others?

f. Paul not only devotes 1 Corinthians 8:9-13 to this important scriptural principle, but then he uses his own personal experience in 1 Corinthians 9 to demonstrate this same scriptural principle as well.

(1) Paul had “power” (authority, a right) to eat and drink whatever was created by God—even that which was sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 9:4).

(2) Paul had “power” (authority, a right) to marry, as did other of the apostles (1 Corinthians 9:5).

(3) Paul had “power” (authority, a right) to be fully supported through the giving of the church (1 Corinthians 9:6-14).

(4) Paul concludes that though these are legitimate “rights” to which he was entitled as a Christian and as a Christian minister, yet he did not insist on using them, if the gospel of Jesus Christ and edification to others would be hindered (1 Corinthians 9:15). Let’s be clear, Paul was not about to compromise the truth of the gospel, doctrine, worship, government, or the morality of God’s law, but he was willing to sacrifice these “rights” that he could live without for the sake of Christ, the gospel, and the brethren. This same principle must be applied in this matter of a ‘secular’ Christmas by brethren who believe they have Christian liberty to celebrate a ‘secular’ Christmas. Paul could have simply shut down the “knowers” immediately by declaring to them that associating with and symbolizing with idolatry and idolaters at the temple is forbidden (this he will yet do in 1 Corinthians 10). But first Paul wants the “knowers” to know something they have sinfully overlooked: Love for the brethren even over the exercise of what they consider to be their Christian liberty. Let us likewise have that kind of love for one another that Christ had for us (a willingness to lay down our lives for one another).

Dear ones, in conclusion, to what are you clinging in this life that you love more than Christ, or that you are unwilling to let go for Christ or for the sake of your brethren in Jesus Christ? **Beloved, love for Christ and others limits our liberty and our “rights”**. But in letting go of this world and even our “rights”, the Lord fills us with a joy that no man can take away (Hebrews 12:1-2).

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